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# Redefining Gatekeeping Theory for a Digital Generation

Lianne Chin-Fook and Heather Simmonds

McMaster University

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# Redefining Gatekeeping Theory for a Digital Generation

Lianne Chin-Fook and Heather Simmonds

## Abstract

Technological advancements and digital media have problematized traditional gatekeeping theory. This paper focuses on how the immediacy, authenticity, and transparency of digital media challenges the original theory of gatekeeping in terms of what defines a gatekeeper, the role of gatekeepers and the speed and flow of information as it pertains to understand those who control and influence the flow of journalistic content and information online. We suggest that news institutions are unsuccessful in attempting to re-appropriate control online by exercising traditional gatekeeping practices. Our new model transforms Shoemaker and Vos' unidirectional flow model (2009) into a multidirectional flow by which all actors have the potential to influence one another and the flow of information. Digital media functions as a hub or nexus of information exchange and influence, connecting everyday individuals to organizations, by primarily channeling through the mediation of networked individuals and professional communicators; thus, gatekeeping is redefined online.

**Keywords:** gatekeeping theory, Pamela Shoemaker, Timothy Vos, online communication, networks, digital media, information flow

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## Redefining Gatekeeping Theory for a Digital Generation

Lianne Chin-Fook and Heather Simmonds  
McMaster University

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, p. 1) digest information and report news to the public in manageable sound bites. Since gatekeepers act as mediators establishing what is important information and worthy of transforming into a public message, gatekeepers contribute to individuals’ construction of social reality and their personal world view (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 1). 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 (p. 5). Web 2.0 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” (p. 83). 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, p. 7). 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, p. 133). 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?

### Facebook

Facebook is a digital media platform that demonstrates these new changes and developments in gatekeeping theory. Facebook is a social media network that allows users to create individual user profiles, business pages, groups, and causes that help individuals, "connect and share with the people in [their] life" (facebook.com, 2011, para. 1). The network is predicated on authenticity and transparency, supporting the notion of increased human-to-human and human-to-business interaction. Digital authenticity requires that one's online per-

sona accurately reflects and portrays one's actual reality. Thus, authentic communication, on social media platforms, focuses on "build[ing] relationships and trust" (Kanter & Fine, 2010, p. 60). Similarly, online transparency focuses on the sharing of information, as "a way of thinking and being for organizations (Kanter & Fine, 2010, p. 76). According to Kanter and Fine (2010), individuals and organizations "must be brutally honest with themselves about whether and how they are open internally and externally" (p. 76).

As of September 2011, Facebook was recognized as the largest social media platform with over 800 million, active users ("measure[d] as users that have logged in during the past 30 days") (Ostrow, 2011, para. 2). Facebook users not only constitute an extremely large audience, they are also a very active audience with over fifty percent of users logging in daily (Stratten, 2010, p. 32). According to Ipsos Reid's recent report entitled, *Canadian Interactive Reid Report special feature on Social Networking*, Facebook is "the dominant player in social networking" with 86% of Canadian users having a profile in 2011 (Ipsos Reid, 2011, para. 6). Since Facebook operates in real-time, information and interaction flows immediately and everyone's voice is relevant (Stratten, 2010, p. 45).

### Twitter

Twitter is a digital media platform, which provides a mechanism by which over 100 million active users worldwide (Bosker, 2011, para. 3) are able to communicate and stay connected with friends, family, and co-workers (Mashable, 2011, para. 1). The primary distinguishing feature of Twitter communication is that "posts, or tweets, are restricted to 140 characters or less" (Mashable, 2011, para. 4). Individuals connect by answering the question: "What are you doing?" (Mashable, 2011, para. 1). Twitter shapes communication in a new way and forces individuals to listen to the communication of others in a new, sound bite format (Mashable, 2011, para. 2). *The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Pro-*

*ject* reports that, in 2010, 19% of American adults “use Twitter or other status update methods” (Rainie, 2010, April 22, slide 17), while Ipsos Reid reports on their *Canadian Interactive Reid Report special feature on Social Networking* that, in 2011, 19% of Canadians are actively using Twitter (Ipsos Reid, 2011, para. 6).

In this way, Twitter exemplifies the principle of immediacy, since it operates in real-time based on user-generated content. Users “can post updates, follow and view updates from other users,” similar to the way that a blog RSS feed functions (Mashable, 2011, para. 4). Twitter users can also connect privately or publicly with other users through direct messages (Mashable, 2011, para. 4). The authenticity anticipated from a Twitter user depends on the number of followers that individual has and their relationship to their followers. Influence and reach, as well as the types of influencers, will be addressed later in this literature review. If an influencer on Twitter has a greater reach (a large number of followers), their followers generally have lower authenticity expectations as they are not closely connected or related to the Twitter user offline.

### LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the third, specific digital media platform that will be referenced throughout this paper. LinkedIn focuses on networking professionals through a database, connecting coworkers and professionals in the workplace, while simultaneously connecting recruiters and job seekers (Grant, 2010, para. 7). LinkedIn focuses on helping individuals on three levels: “getting back in touch” (Windmills Marketing, 2009, para. 8); “acquiring and sharing expertise” (Windmills Marketing, 2009, para. 9); and “career management” (Windmills Marketing, 2009, para. 10). LinkedIn summarizes information using headings similar to a resume; headings include, but are not limited to “Profile Headline,” “Summary,” “Education,” and “Company” (Windmill Marketing, 2009, para. 3). As of

2010, LinkedIn Corp. reported more than two million Canadian members on the digital media platform (Grant, 2010, para. 2). The number of Canadian users in 2010 was almost double the number of users in 2009, making the Canadian market one of the fastest-growing LinkedIn member markets in the world among the 200 countries with registered members (Grant, 2010, para. 2). In 2011, Ipsos Reid reports that, 14% of Canadians are using the professional networking site of LinkedIn in their *Canadian Interactive Reid Report special feature on Social Networking* (Ipsos Reid, 2011, para. 6).

### Speed of Information in Digital Networks

The speed of communication on online networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn further complicates gatekeeping theory. As Gitlin (2002) observes, the flow of information and creation of news is a critical part of capitalist societies (p. 71). The speed of information flow translates directly to capitalistic gain (Gitlin, 2002, p. 71). Real-time, digital engagement has produced an audience expectant of an immediate turnover of information that flows through the gates in a multidirectional movement (Gitlin, 2002, p. 76). Digital media platforms and self-reporting mechanisms, such as citizen journalism, enable audience members to create news and to participate in information production and cultural exchange in a new way that suits their fast culture (Gitlin, 2002, p. 103). However, as Gitlin (2002) outlines, the question remains: who or “what drives the machine?” (p. 103). Given that there are gatekeepers on the Internet and, specifically, on social media platforms, what are the implications if there are only a few gatekeepers for a wide and global audience (Poor, 2006, p. 44)? Even still, could different media forms limit interactivity between gatekeepers, newsmakers, and news receivers in order to increase their own control online? Is this in itself a form of gatekeeping?

## Web 2.0, Gatekeeping, and News

The speed of information online greatly effects news through Web 2.0 technology. Ira Basen (2011) investigates the shift in journalistic practices online through his discussion of digital media platforms and citizen journalism, engaging with gatekeeping theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Basen (2011) supports the notion that Twitter and Facebook are at the forefront of digital media platforms. Moreover, Basen (2011) purports that Twitter and Facebook have changed the very nature of our language and how we communicate. Thus, it logically follows that gatekeeping theory is also redefined online.

Digital media platforms enable less filters and gates online, leaving individuals to determine truth, what is news, and what is important (Basen, 2011). Basen (2011) focuses on citizen journalism as an example of the reduction of gates online, stating, “anyone can post anything [online] and no one will fact check it, edit it or filter it in any way.” He addresses the way in which Web 2.0 technology transform the way news is gathered, reported, and consumed; that is, the way in which news is passed through the gates (Basen, 2011). Basen (2011) clearly identifies that there are theoretical, practical, and realized differences between News 1.0 and News 2.0, denoting the transformation of gatekeeping practices and the appearance of new gatekeepers in the digital age. For one, Basen (2011) proposes that news aggregation and crowdsourcing are new filters or gates in the Web 2.0 age, highlighting that news gathering and production are “becoming a collective pursuit.” The popularity of RSS feeds and other news aggregation resources is evidenced by *The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project*, which reports that, in 2010, 40% of American adults used RSS feeds (Rainie, 2010).

Like Basen, Keen (2008) also identifies changes in gatekeeping practices and the gatekeepers themselves. Keen (2008) argues that Web 2.0 negatively effects gatekeeping,



through the reduction of gates and official gatekeepers, accountability, professionalism, and expert information decline. While Keen (2008) observes a definite shift in gatekeeping practices on digital media platforms, he suggests that cultural gatekeepers are necessary in today's torrent of media information (news, advertisements, etc.) to help everyday individuals filter through what is useful, credible, reliable, and important. Keen (2008) supports the theoretical model that follows in this paper, inferring that Web 2.0 gives everyone an equal opportunity to become a gatekeeper online and suggesting that the crowd or network itself also functions as a gatekeeper.

### Networks

Networks determine the connectedness of individuals to each other and within markets through their connectedness to businesses, institutions, and organizations (Moller & Halinen, 1999). Kanter and Fine (2010) further deconstruct the network as being comprised of two main components: "people or organizations called nodes [...] and the connections between the, called ties" (p. 27). The ties are critical, since, without ties a network would not exist (Kanter & Fine, 2010). Kanter and Fine (2010) define "hubs" as larger nodes or points of connectedness within a network (p. 27). This description of hubs is incorporated into our theoretical understanding and model of *Redefining Gatekeeping Theory*, since within hubs the greatest amount of connection and influence occurs. Thus, highly networked individuals are located within hubs.

As Moller and Halinen (1999) anticipate in their work on networks, the Internet changes the relationships and power positions within networks, thus shifting gatekeeping and the role of the gatekeeper within networks. Moller and Halinen's assumption is validated by recent research from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Rainie (2010) observes that individuals involved in digital, participatory media platforms

are changing how communities and networks of all kinds form and perform (para. 1). Gatekeepers can increase their effectiveness by properly using networks in order to gain better information about and access to everyday individuals and/or prospective customers (Moller & Halinen, 1999). Online networks are a valuable source, as is demonstrated by *The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project*, which reports that, in 2010, 84% of American adults participated in a group or identified network with an online presence (Rainie, 2010).

Since networks depend on relationships, they depend on “the roles of attraction, trust and commitment, and relational investments and adaptations” (Moller & Halinen, 1999, p. 419). Since digital networks anticipate that individuals’ online personas represent who they are offline (authenticity), building trust is especially critical in establishing and expanding one’s network in the digital world. As developing relationships takes time, building a network also takes a substantial amount of time (Moller & Halinen, 1999). Thus, organizations, institutions, and businesses are keen to use networked individuals to increase their reach, attaching themselves to the relationships, trust, and reputation that the networked individual has already established for themselves within their personal, peer-to-peer network. Thus, networks are dependent on influence and influencers.

### Network Weaving

Within networks, key influencers or networked individuals conduct “network weaving activities” (Kanter & Fine, 2010, p. 36). Networking weaving is a term that describes a set of skills and characteristics, which help establish and strengthen social networks online (Kanter & Fine, 2010). Networking weaving activities include, but are not limited to: connecting people to one another, initiating and facilitating authentic and meaningful conversations among individuals, building relationships, working with individuals using multiple digital

channels, and inviting individuals to join at different points of conversation using various digital media platforms (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

### Agenda Setting Theory and its Role in Redefining Gatekeeping Theory

If decisions about what information makes news or passes through the gates are made by people, presumably the more influence and reach an individual has, the more easily that individual can “select, shape, and otherwise determine what becomes news” (Shoemaker, 2006, p. 109). Once an event is deemed newsworthy, an individual must decide what to do with it and whether or not to transform it into a message that passes through the gates. However, the construction of digital media platforms as equal for all begs the question: do individuals have more influence on the propagation and gatekeeping of information on the level playing field of digital culture? While McCombs and Reynolds (2002) argue that the agenda-setting role belongs to the news media, who then set the agenda for public thought and production, one must consider the way in which the Internet has transformed agenda-setting theory. Individuals can now emphasize certain news issues or pieces of information to various degrees, highlighting them on social media platforms, blogs, and personal websites. To what degree does this two-way discussion, that is, the ability of individuals to construct and contribute to social reality online, change the very nature of how people think and talk about issues (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002)?

### Influence and Influencers

Sheldrake’s (2011) *The Business of Influence* provides a useful framework for understanding and contextualizing the role of influencers and the different types of influencers. First, Sheldrake (2011) claims that “influence” can be identified as those instances when individuals “think in a way that they would not have otherwise thought” or when individuals “do some-

thing that they would not have otherwise done” (p. 188). In defining and understanding influence, it is important to recognize that there are a minimal number of influencers in society (Sheldrake, 2011). Thus, if you reach influencers, you reach their network. By reaching a few key people, you reach hundreds, thousands, and millions of other individuals through their network’s reach (Sheldrake, 2011).

### Types of Influencers

Sheldrake (2011) categorizes influencers as, “key influencers,” “social influencers,” and “known peer influencers” (p.52-3). Key influencers have an influence on specific brands, product, service, and purchasing decisions using digital, social platforms (Sheldrake, 2011). Key influencers usually have a large, developed presence on digital platforms, i.e. their own blog, a substantial Twitter following, and a great number of Facebook friends (Sheldrake, 2011). Due to the size of their network, key followers generally do not know those in their network personally (Sheldrake, 2011). Social influencers are everyday people, who influence others’ purchasing decisions and spending patterns through product/service reviews, updating their Facebook status posting product/service comments to their Twitter feeds, and/or making comments on blogs or forums (Sheldrake, 2011). Social influencers often know the individuals in their network personally and are aware of the consumers they influence (Sheldrake, 2011). Finally, known peer influencers are usually closely connected to those in their network, i.e. family members or friends (Sheldrake, 2011). Thus, due to their proximity and the depth of their relationship, known peer influencers are both the closest to the consumer and have the greatest impact on their peers purchasing decisions because they are accountable to their influence (Sheldrake, 2011). The theoretical model that follows from this literature review conceives of key influencers, social influencers, and known peer influencers as all types of networked individuals with varying

amounts of reach within their network. Key influencers may also be categorized as professional communicators if they are communicating with a certain corporation's or organization's motives in mind.

#### Statistical Evidence Supporting Known Peer Influencers as the Strongest Influencers

Sheldrake (2011) supports his categorization of the types of influencers with a series of statistics, which demonstrate the role of influencers in marketing and gatekeeping on digital platforms. The statistics demonstrate that "close family and friends" have a "heavy influence" on 78% of their close peers in spreading awareness about products, services, and organizations (Sheldrake, 2011, p. 54). "Close family and friends" have an even stronger influence during the "action phase" in which their close peers actually make product and service decisions and purchases, reporting a 79% "heavy influence" on those studied (Sheldrake, 2011, p. 54). *The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project* supports the claim that individuals are seeking out reviews of products, services, and persons online (Rainie, 2010). In 2010, 31% of American adults rated a person, product, or service online, clearly demonstrating that they are seeking out influencers online, while simultaneously seeking to be influencers online (Rainie, 2010).

#### Influence Professionals and Professional Communicators

Sheldrake (2011) also defines "influence professionals" (p. 174). An influence professional generally has organizational, analytical, communications, and strategic responsibilities within an organization (Sheldrake, 2011). An influence professional's key role and responsibility is in helping an organization situate itself for influence and success (Sheldrake, 2011). In the theoretical model that follows, "influence professionals" can be likened to professional communicators as they represent an organization, institution, company, or corporation's gatekeeping and communications interests. Profes-

sional communicators are representatives of an organization who seek to influence others and act as cultural gatekeepers through online networks. According to Solis (2011, February 10), professional communicators, “act as human gatekeepers to company leaders,” ensuring that the desired outcomes happen online both in proactive and reactive communication (para. 3). Since professional communicators now have 24/7 access to digital media platforms, their task is simultaneously facilitated by these platforms and intensified and complicated by these platforms as the amount of information and participants online greatly increases (Solis, 2011).

### Measuring Influence

In order to operationalize and validate the theoretical model that follows this literature review, it is necessary to trace influence and the impact of the “new gatekeepers.” The “validations” section of this paper will propose using Shel-drake’s (2011) “influence traceability quadrants” and “influence scorecard” (p. 54, 188).

### Organizations

As will be demonstrated later in this paper, organizations are a key component of our operational definitions and theoretical model in *Redefining Gatekeeping Theory for a Digital Generation*. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) define an organization as, “the social, formal, usually economic entity that employs the media worked in order to produce media content” (p. 138). Shoemaker and Vos’ (2009) *Gatekeeping Theory* further contextualizes communications organizations as “symbolic realities” more than “activity systems,” since communications organizations, as gatekeepers, decide which events to select and include in a symbolic, created form (p. 62). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) continue to define organizations by their power, claiming that one of an organization’s greatest powers is the ability to hire and fire. Organizations desire gatekeepers that perfectly represent and carry out the organization’s point of view

and interests (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Thus, in traditional gatekeeping, if the organization does not like the way in which the gatekeeper (professional communicator) operates the gates, they can simply fire the gatekeeper (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Organizations can benefit from Web 2.0 as they can follow and trace conversations and actions across the Web in order to understand what is trending, what conversations are happening, and thus, in order to better instruct their professional communicators on “how to stimulate, broaden, and deepen conversations” that are in the organization’s best interest (Kanter & Fine, 2010, p. 126).

### Assumptions

Our theory makes the following assumptions:

1. The Internet is a far-reaching avenue of global communication that extends beyond international borders. The Internet is a sustainable method of communication that will continue to develop and advance for decades to come. This assumption is supported by research from *The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project*, which reports a 29% increase in Internet usership among American adults from 2000-2010 (Rainie, 2010). In 2010, 75% of American adults use the Internet (Rainie, 2010). Thus, everyday individuals will continue to rely on Internet communication.
2. Digital media currently includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Provided that individuals have access to technology and the Internet, digital media is freely accessible media that entails unrestricted access. Thus, each individual has an equal opportunity to become networked and to exercise influence within online networks.
3. Shoemaker’s and Vos’ *Gatekeeping Theory* is based on traditional communication methods (news institutions, news-

papers, media corporations, etc.). Traditional gatekeeping indicates a unidirectional flow through the gates by which gatekeepers exercise various levels of control and influence on the flow of information. While digital media re-contextualizes gatekeeping practices, gatekeeping still exists and occurs online.

4. Newsmakers are trying to re-appropriate their control and influence online by exercising traditional gatekeeping practices; however, they are unsuccessful in this attempt because the flow of information is no longer unidirectional (from institutions to individuals). The flow of information online is multidirectional; institutions, professional communicators, networked individuals, and everyday individuals all influence one another online through the use of digital media.
  
5. Digital media platforms do not function as technological gatekeepers. Digital media platforms function by using technological algorithms and structures dictated by Web 2.0. These structures dictate the way in which content is generated and displayed, yet they require users to generate, input, and update the content. Since Web 2.0 requires user-generated content, individuals are gatekeepers and influencers online. Thus, gatekeeping is imposed by individuals and is not inherent to the technological constructs of Web 2.0 digital media platforms.

#### Research Questions

As this literature review demonstrates and as the aforementioned assumptions presume, current research raises questions about the role of gatekeeping in digital media. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) outline how the interactivity between audiences and newsmakers has turned the audience into gatekeepers. However, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) ne-



glect to focus on the extent to which digital media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, are able to influence audiences' and public knowledge. One must consider how digital media has influenced individuals' daily routines online in order to understand how humans communicate with one another as a form of cultural exchange and production. Digital media bridges the gap between the institution and the users, enabling a new, individual level of human communication online.

This theory attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How and to what extent are the routines of gatekeeping theory redefined by digital media?
2. How and to what extent do the principles of immediacy, authenticity, and transparency challenge the unidirectional flow of traditional gatekeeping?
3. Who are the new gatekeepers in digital media?

### Theory

Our theory of networked individuals addresses how the flow of information is redefined through the use of digital media, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. As outlined by Shoemaker and Vos (2009), traditional gatekeeping practices flows from the production of raw news to the completed product, outlining the two most important individuals in gatekeeping to be news gatherers and news processors. Our theory of networked individuals still highlights these individuals as two of the most important individuals in the gatekeeping process online, where news gatherers are now networked individuals and news processors are professional communicators. Thus, our model transforms Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) unidirectional flow through the gates into a multidirectional flow by which everyday individuals, networked individuals,

professional communicators, and institutions all have the potential to influence one another and the flow of information online.

The following operational definitions are essential for a complete understanding of our model, *Redefining Gatekeeping Theory for a Digital Generation*. The definitions will be outlined prior to outlining the overall flow of information online in model form.

<b>Institutions/Companies</b> Institutions and companies are well-known private or public organizations, which produce products and services for everyday individuals.
<b>Professional Communicators</b> Professional communicators are working professionals who are employed by institutions or companies in the field of communications to spin, package, and frame their information. It is also important to note that professional communicators are not necessarily networked individuals.
<b>Networked Individuals</b> A networked individual is an individual online who is generating questions and moving thoughts among their social network. Some examples include thoughts and opinions on brands, products or services, which influence the thoughts of others in their network.
<b>Everyday Individuals</b> Everyday individuals are considered to be normal people in society. These individuals are audience members who are accessible through the use of digital media.
<b>The Hub</b> A nexus that connects everyday individuals and organizations. The hub acts as the central place of information where most of the communication occurs. Within the hub, networked individuals and professional communicators mediate the multidirectional flow of information.
<b>Unidirectional Flow of Information</b> This arrow represents traditional gatekeeping practices outlined by Shoemaker and Vos, where the flow of information is unidirectional. It represents organizational ideal where institutions/companies can act as newsmakers to set the agenda for public thought.

Thus, Figure 1.1 demonstrates the organizational ideal of the unidirectional flow of information as outlined in traditional gatekeeping practices by Shoemaker and Vos in *Gatekeeping Theory*.

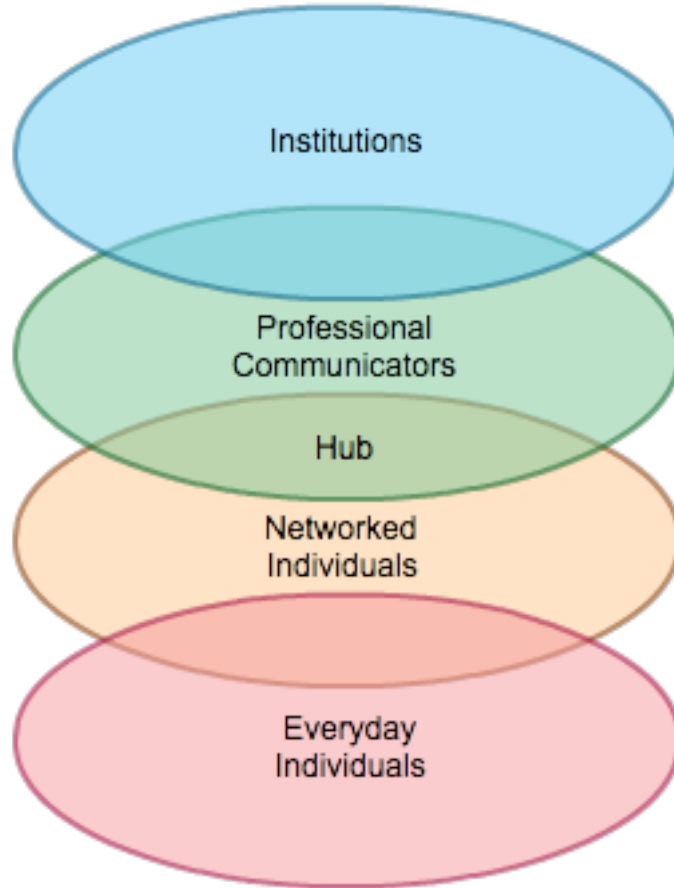


Figure 1.1: Traditional Gatekeeping – Unidirectional Flow

However, the rise of digital media has caused the need for the redefinition of gatekeeping practices online. We propose that the flow of information is multidirectional, where every-

day individuals and institutions/companies have an equal opportunity to be gatekeepers online.

We propose the following theoretical model, as exemplified in Figure 2.1, as the redefinition of gatekeeping theory on digital media platforms.

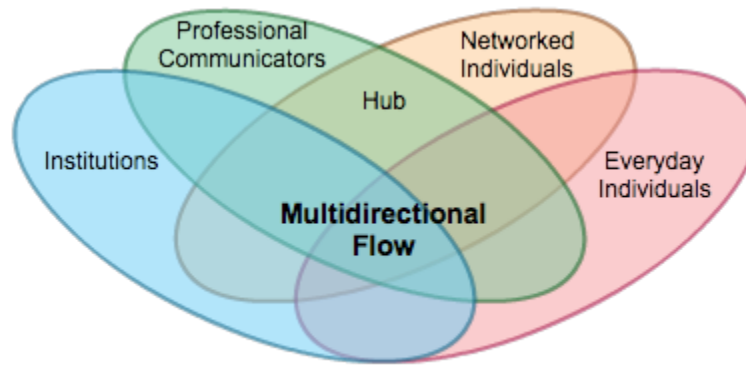


Figure 2.1: Gatekeeping Redefined – Multidirectional Flow

#### Validations

The literature review and explanations provide a foundation for our theoretical model. However, research is necessary to validate and provide empirical evidence to our theoretical model. Our proposed methodological approach includes the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods of online surveys, content analysis and focus groups.

To validate our theoretical model, we intend to survey everyday individuals. Surveying everyday individuals will enable us to determine individuals' expectations for organizations on digital media platforms, while providing insight into the participants' perceptions of how they obtain their information online. Online surveys provide hard facts in a structured format, which will help for cross-referencing in our analysis (Paine, 2011). This questionnaire will be distributed online on each of the digital media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and

LinkedIn through a snowball sample and will include a series of closed and open-ended questions.

For our theoretical model, it is also important determine the flow of information and communication that occurs online. Since digital media platforms allow for real-time response and customer interaction, we intend to complete a thorough quantitative content analysis to determine how companies and individuals interact on the digital media platforms of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Conducting a thorough quantitative content analysis will provide us the opportunity to observe and listen to the communication that is occurring online (Paine, 2011). A thorough content analysis will help gain a better understanding of the type of information that is flowing through the gates of digital media from institutions to everyday individuals and everyday individuals to institutions, and how these two groups are interacting with one another online. We will extract recurring themes and determine a coding frame for themes and actions taken so that we can accurately quantify themes, complaints and messages to determine if there was action that occurred on behalf of the institutions or everyday individuals (Paine, 2011).

Furthermore, our validation for our theoretical model will also include the qualitative research method of focus groups. Focus groups can help us, as researchers, to discover new areas to investigate for our research (Paine, 2011). We will hold two focus group sessions that will contain a series of open-ended questions. These focus groups will be with networked individuals to gain a better understanding of how these individuals' perceive their influence as purposeful (self-aware) or accidental (unaware) influence. The focus groups sessions will be "influence-centric" in nature; that is, they will focus firstly on the "influenced," and secondly on "tracing influence" (Sheldrake, 2011, p. 188). This aspect of qualitative research will also provide insight into how networked individuals determine what is important online.

To obtain our sample of networked individuals, we will need to distinguish between everyday individuals and networked individuals. Networked individuals will be measured based on the amount of influence and involvement each individual holds on their digital media platforms of Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. Networked individuals influence in the gatekeeping process will be traced using Sheldrake's (2011) "influence traceability quadrants," which measure "self-aware" and "self-unaware" influence according to mediums and networks that are "digitally inaccessible" or "digitally accessible" (p. 69). Our goal is to obtain key influencers or social influencers, as they will hold the larger networks online (Sheldrake, 2011). According to Sheldrake (2011), while key influencers and social influencers have the greatest reach and largest network, known peer influencers have the greatest impact on those in their network because of their relationship to them. Thus, known peer influencers will be sought out for the purpose of these focus groups since their influence has the greatest return on investment (ROI) for businesses, institutions, organizations, and everyday people alike. Influence will be measured according to a number of aspects, such as the quality of content that is posted on their Facebook profiles, the number of Twitter followers, LinkedIn connections. Other applications, such as Klout and Crowdboost, will be used to determine niche markets and prominent topics that individuals hold influence in on their network.

It is through the use of the research methods of online surveys, content analysis and focus groups that we will be able to validate our theory of networked individuals as a successful model for reframing of gatekeeping theory in the age of digital media.

### Discussion

As this theoretical model was created and discussed, other questions arose. If this theoretical approach were to be

adopted, some other aspects of the theory that could be further investigated include:

- Are networked individuals, whether intentional (self-aware) or accidental (unaware) covert or overt in their interactions online? That is, are others aware of networked individuals online and how are networked individuals intentionally or unintentionally trying to influence their actions and decision-making?
- What expectations do individuals have for institutions, companies, and organizations on digital media platforms?
- Do individuals expect institutions, companies, and organizations to respond directly to their personal requests, comments, and/or complaints?
- Following from individuals' preferences, should institutions, companies, and organizations be proactive (anticipating and generating conversation online) or reactive (responding to direct comments, requests, difficulties, and complaints in online conversations) in their communication on digital media platforms?
- Should the thoughts of everyday individuals, as communicated on digital media platforms, translate into actual, real life product and service decisions by institutions, companies, and organizations?
- How and to what extent do the preferences, comments, reviews, and suggestions of networked individuals translate to market trends and product/service preferences in the lives of everyday individuals in their network?
- How and to what extent do the format, calculations, and technology inherent to the digital media platform shape the gatekeeping that occurs on said digital media platform?
- Could companies or organizations re-appropriate their control and influence online through traditional gatekeeping practices if they were able to technologically determine the types of gatekeeping and influence possible on

certain digital media platforms, i.e. What would happen to gatekeeping if institutions, companies, and/or organizations owned and controlled certain digital media platforms? For example, how does a technological media enterprise, like Google, function as a gatekeeper or influencer?

### Conclusion

Our research provides evidence that Shoemaker and Vos' unidirectional flow of gatekeeping (2009) has been challenged by the emergence of digital media. Their model has been transformed in this paper to include multidirectional flow by which all actors have the potential to influence one another and the flow of information, effectively connecting everyday individuals to organizations by primarily channeling through the mediation of the hub consisting of networked individuals and professional communicators. Thus, digital media have not led to the dissolve of gatekeeping online. Rather, gatekeeping continues to evolve, modify, and shift in tandem with media and our culture.



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