Network Gatekeeping Theory

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The concept of *gatekeeper* was first coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947; 1951). Lewin's theory of "*channels and gatekeepers*" was developed as a means of understanding how to produce widespread social changes in communities. Later, gatekeeping theories were applied to various fields. Thus, in some disciplines as communication and journalism the notions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers were used in theory for understanding social systems, while in other fields as health science, operation research, and technology development the notions were developed more as part of service practices (Beckman & Mays, 1985; Motoyer-Duran, 1993; Shoemaker, 1991; Shumsky & Pinker, 2003).

Keeping on with the initial course of gatekeeping research, as referred to in the communication literature, Barzilai-Nahon (2004) has suggested a new theory of gatekeeping, Network Gatekeeping Theory (Thereafter: NGT) through multidisciplinary aspects: information systems, management, political science and sociology.

Traditional theories of Gatekeeping were mainly applied in communication (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1989; Gieber, 1956; Shoemaker, 1991; White, 1950). These theories mainly referred to gatekeeping as a selection process and offered communication 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 research on social change, and examine sources for cultural diversity.

As networks and more specifically the Internet became ubiquitous, a growing number of scholars have used the term *gatekeeper* commonly (Birnhack & Elkin-Koren, 2003; Cornfield & Rainie, 2003; Hargittai, 2000), but when used, it is mostly done for reasons of illustration rather then using it as a part of a theoretical framework. Cyberspace has changed the identity of gatekeepers and their role, whilst gatekeeping as a process has been altered as well. NGT offers new definitions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers adapting traditional concepts to a networked society. NGT (Barzilai-Nahon, 2004) is based on examination of power relations in the Internet, a space of information, and conceptualizes the distribution of information and processes of information control. Hence it enables to analyze centralization in networks, which have a decentralized design, and are grasped in many cases as egalitarian spaces. NGT has a great deal of ramifications on comprehension of information dissemination and users behavior in the Internet.

NGT Basic concepts:

Gate – The entrance to or the exit from a network or its sections.
Gatekeeping – Process of controlling information as it moves through a gate. Activities include selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard and deletion of information.
Gatekeeping Mechanism[1] – Tool, technology or methodology used to carry out the process of gatekeeping.
Network Gatekeeper – Entity (people, organizations, or governments) that has the discretion to exercise gatekeeping through a gatekeeping mechanism in networks and can choose the extent to which to exercise it.
Gated – Entity that is subject to a gatekeeping process.

Gatekeepers in networks have three prime goals. First, preventing the entrance of undesired information from the outside. Second, preventing the exit of undesired information to the outside. Third, controlling information inside the network.

Table 1 below summarizes the exclusiveness of NGT compared to traditional gatekeeping theories:

Table 1: Traditional Gatekeeping vs. NGT

	Traditional Gatekeeping	**Network Gatekeeping Theory (NGT)**
Gatekeeping process	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.
Focus on gatekeepers	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).
Focus on gatekeeping mechanism	Editorial mechanisms	Nine categories are part of gatekeeping mechanisms (e.g., censorship, channeling, infrastructure mechanisms), and one meta-category, the regulation mechanism
Relationship	Relations of sender-receiver	Frequent exchange interaction between gated and gatekeeper
Information	Notion of source-destination	No necessary association between source-destination and gatekeeper-gated

[1] Both terms, *Gatekeeping Mechanisms* and *Gated* do not exist in the literature and have been introduced in Barzilai-Nahon (2004).

	Only gatekeepers produce and create information freely	The gated also create and produce information[2]
Alternatives	No alternatives to gatekeeping	Possible circumvention of gatekeepers and gatekeeping mechanisms
Power	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.
Number of gatekeepers	One to a few	A few to many
Types of gatekeepers	One to a few	A few to many

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 an editor in a newspaper, television or radio station, playing the role of the sender; the gated, perceived as a newspaper reader, television viewer, or radio listener played the role of the receiver. The gatekeeper was responsible for editing, producing and distributing information to be received by the gated. In context of networks, the notion of sender-receiver is no longer significant. During any interaction in the net the roles of sender-receiver are repeatedly exchanged, while the gatekeeper and the gated can play both roles.

Consistent with the notion of sender-receiver, traditional literature treats information that passes from sender to receiver as having a source-destination direction. Again, the source is presumed to be the originator that sends the information, i.e., the gatekeeper, and the information that reaches the gated is presumed to be the destination. However, in the context of networks, information can be produced also by the gated, and it can serve as a source. Therefore, the gatekeeper can serve also 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 asking to react to an article may do so only by means of a specific column reserved for reader responses, and one of the editors must approve it for publication. NGT argues and proves that in networks the balance between gatekeepers and gated is more complex. It is indeed likely that the gatekeepers create and produce greater volumes of information than gated because of their vast resources. Nevertheless, 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 attention. The existence of alternative public platforms to

[2] A distinction should be made between *create* and *produce* information. *Create* refers to bring information into existence, while *produce* refers to manufacturing and displaying the information item in the Internet

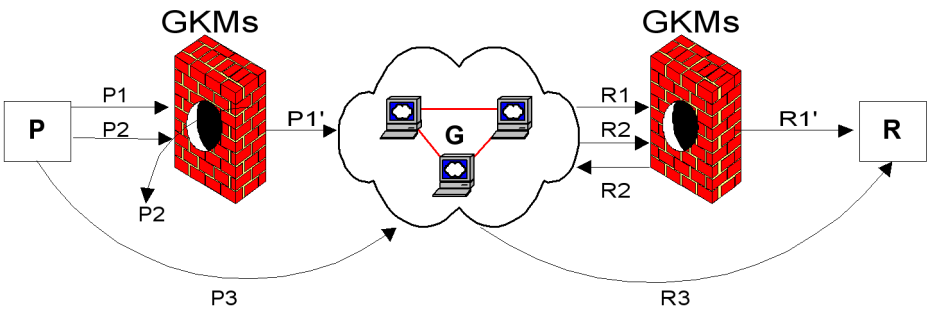
gatekeepers is important and significant in itself because it contributes to a more pluralized cyberspace, even if it does so only to a limited degree. Another way of analyzing gated power in networks is by focusing on the production of information rather than on the creation of information. A gated 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 ability to circumvent the gatekeeping process is minimal. The only alterative is to circumvent a specific gatekeeper by moving to another within the same community and that is subject to the same gatekeeping biases and procedures. For example, a reader can switch from one newspaper to another, but the process of gatekeeping through the press 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, however, the situation is significantly more complicated. The gated may have alternatives and the power to create and produce information. Their bargaining position and consequently their power are enhanced relative to that in traditional mass media. Consequently, gatekeepers must avoid conditions which 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 on the gated.

The following figure summarizes the above discussion:

Figure 1: Illustrative Model of Network Gatekeeping



P = Poster (gatekeeper or gated or user), one who posts new information to a network

P1 = Items of information that attempt to enter a network

P2 = Items of information that attempt to enter a network and and were dicarded following a gatekeeping process

P3 = Items of information that enter a network by circumventing the gatekeeping mechanism

P1' = Items of information that attempt to enter a network and have passed a gatekeeping process

R = Retriever (gated or user), one who retrieves new information from a network

R1 = Items of information that attemt to exit a network

R2 = Items of information that attempt to exit a network and were prevented from doing so by a gatekeeping process

R3 = Items of information that exit a network by circumventing the gatekeeping mechanism

R1' = Items of information that exit a network and have passed a gatekeeping process

GKMs = Gatekeeping Mechanism (can be more than one)

G = Gated

Traditional Gatekeeping researches usually use ethnographic case-studies methodologies. In analyzing gatekeeping in a networked context, this might not be sufficient. Barzilai-Nahon 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 (Barzilai-Nahon, 2004). That way NGT enables not only to understand information control but also to predict patterns of users' behavior in the net. 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).

To summarize, the Internet poses new paradigmatic challenges. On the one hand, it is a more open space than other offline means of communications and allows a more diversity in behavioral modes of users. One the other hand, information control is frequent, and consequently scholars and practitioners should be aware of the importance of analyzing the cyberspace through the lenses of gatekeeping. NGT enables to conceptualize and analyze information flow in the Internet, both technically and socially. It may emphasize power relations among relevant actors through information flow, and identify potential bottlenecks and obstacles, which might prevent users and companies from entering the network and perform an effective and efficient presence on the Internet. Finally, analyzing phenomena of information flow through NGT also helps practitioners as well as scholars to estimate aspects of virtual communities' cultures, by realizing the forces that control and provide information to members of online communities.

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