

Gatekeepers, Virtual Communities and the Gated: Multidimensional Tensions in Cyberspace

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Abstract

Gatekeeping/Information Control is exercised frequently and daily in virtual communities. In this context, Gatekeeping mainly exists in four different levels of stakeholders: formal regulators, infrastructure regulators (e.g., service providers), communities' managers and members of the communities (serving in two roles: as representatives of the communities or as individuals). The article analyzes the sensitive balance of relationships among these stakeholders. Additionally, it examines how power is manifested and exercised through information control in forums. Three levels that impact gatekeeping's nature are analyzed – the gatekeepers, the community and the gated while addressing: first, the duality of gatekeepers as protectors or manipulators; second, the politics of power of marginalized groups in cyberspace; and finally, the meaning of gated anonymity to information control.

1. Introduction – Researching Virtual Communities through a Network Gatekeeping Framework

Studies of virtual communities attract scholarly attention of various disciplines – sociology, psychology, management and communications (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Matzat, 2004; Oxendine, Borgidab, Sullivana, & Jackson, 2003; Toder-Alon, Brunel, Siegal, & L., 2005). This paper will use information science

as an anchor point, and particularly *Network Gatekeeping Framework*, for analyzing virtual communities (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005; Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005b). This framework provides an advantage of looking at information flow in a context of networks and allows compound analysis of power interactions between various stakeholders.

The concept of *gatekeeper* was first coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947; , 1951). His theory of “*channels and gatekeepers*” was developed to understand focal points of social changes in communities. The entrance to a channel and to its sections was presented as a *gate*, and the movement within the channel and between the channel and its external environments was presented as controlled by one or more gatekeepers or “impartial rules” (Lewin, 1951). Later, the concept of gatekeeping was applied to various fields, specifically to practical domains such as journalism (e.g., editors of newspapers would be considered as gatekeepers), health science, operation research, and technology development (e.g., consultant who renders a second opinion, or intermediaries) (Beckman & Mays, 1985; Motoyer-Duran, 1993; Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001; Shumsky & Pinker, 2003). Most of the theories from the communication field grasped the role of the gatekeeper as an individual who selects information, messages and items and has discretion to decide what should be published in the media. Most theories have also attempted to develop explanatory models for gatekeeping as a decision process. These include subjective factors as determining the results of gatekeeping (e.g. personal judgment and trust) (Levingston & Bennet, 2003; Shoemaker, 1991; Snider, 1967; White, 1950); information characteristics as increasing or decreasing the likelihood to experience gatekeeping (Abott & Brassfield, 1989; Gieber, 1956); external constraints as determining the nature of gatekeeping (e.g., time constraints) (R. L. Jones, Troldahl, & Hvistendahl, 1961; Levingston & Bennet, 2003); organization characteristics and procedures as influencing gatekeeping (Bagdikian, 2004; Bantz, 1990); institutional environment and the social system as prominent pressure factors on gatekeeping as a process (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1989; Gramsci, 1971)¹.

¹ For more elaboration of traditional gatekeeping see Shoemaker (1991).

Most gatekeeping studies found in communication literature focus on individuals as the unit of analysis and grasp their role mainly as applying selection. Referring to gatekeeping only as a selection process underrates and simplifies the importance of the process in networks. This is particularly projected in virtual communities' context where reciprocal and personal relationships among people for a long period of time play a major role and therefore shape complicated conditions that invite a careful examination of these relationships. *Network Gatekeeping Framework* (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005; Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005b), on the other hand, defines gatekeeping as a process of an information control or management. More specifically, *Network Gatekeeping Framework* defines gatekeeping as "a process of controlling information as it moves through a gate. Activities of network Gatekeeping include selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard and deletion of information". A network gatekeeper is defined as an "[e]ntity (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" (Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005b, p. 9). Accordingly, this article is using the notion of gatekeeping in its full sense in the context of virtual communities in order to explicate the factors that affect information control.

2. Gatekeeping in Virtual Communities

Gatekeeping is exercised in the context of virtual communities in the Internet mainly through four hubs of stakeholders. First, formal regulators, i.e., any institutionalized corpus recognized and empowered by a self governing entity (e.g., the nation-state, the UN). Second, infrastructure regulators - public or private bodies that have the power to regulate behavior of users related to infrastructure matters. In the context of virtual communities I will mainly focus on the role of service providers, which provide the infrastructure platform of the virtual community, and serve as the entity that represents communities externally in the face of formal regulators.² Third, community managers

² Infrastructure regulators also include industry regulators and network service providers that act as indirect actors in context of virtual communities by providing and determining the characteristic basic elements of

who have responsibility over the daily operation of their communities. Finally, members of the community who have two roles as stakeholders - as individual users and as representing the community.

Different gatekeeping mechanisms are at the stakeholders' disposal to facilitate gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2004). Below I characterize the main ones that apply to virtual communities.

- **Censorship mechanisms** – tools, technology or methodology used to carry out deletion, filtering, blocking or zoning of content or users. For example: deletion of messages by communities' managers, removal of users' accounts by service providers, filtering or blocking messages beforehand (only in certain types of virtual communities – e.g. listservs with moderators).
- **Editorial mechanisms** – mechanisms that modify content. These mechanisms are similar to mechanisms that traditional gatekeepers use (e.g., editors of newspapers who go over the content and decide what will be published or not).
- **Channeling mechanisms** – mechanisms that help direct users' attention. Examples include making some issues more conspicuous to community members through hyperlinks, ranking content, and displaying these issues in projecting areas inside spaces of virtual communities. It can be considered as an editorial mechanism that deals with the logical structure of what users see when they are engaged in the online community.
- **Security mechanisms** – In the context of virtual communities these mechanisms are responsible for guarding the boundaries of a community. Examples include managing authentication procedures for users, or managing communities of black or white lists (e.g., by making sure, users who are not part of the group, will not be able to participate in the group discussions).
- **Localization mechanisms** – mechanisms that adapt content and technology to specific cultural characteristics. For example, making sure legal procedures are compatible with the external environment.

connectivity in general in the Internet. In this article we will not discuss their role due to the indirectness of their relationship with communities.

- **Infrastructure mechanisms** – mechanisms that manage users' behavior at the infrastructure level – for example providing space for groups to do more than just asynchronous correspondence.
- **Regulation mechanisms** – Constructing rules of behaviors inside communities (e.g., community codes), training, and guidance regarding how to react in various situations.

This study will use the *Network Gatekeeping Framework* as constructed by Barzilai-Nahon and Neumann (Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005b). Accordingly, the analysis will take into account the following elements when explaining relationships among the four stakeholders and their proficiency at information control: the focus of gatekeeping mechanisms; scope of gatekeeping; relationships between the gatekeeper and the gated; perceived political power; number of gates; and types of gates. The analysis is focused on the example of deletion of messages after they are posted in virtual forums. This is a type of information control that is being exercised commonly by community managers.

I raise two research questions. First, what are the factors that may affect the process of gatekeeping, and more specifically the deletion of messages by managers? Second, what are the explanatory factors for reasons for gatekeeping in virtual communities? There is extensive literature on the dynamics of behavior that occur in virtual communities (Goldner & Donath, 2004; Q. Jones, Ravid, & Rafaeli, 2004; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Most of it is qualitative and focuses on one or a few case studies of virtual communities. Hence, it is difficult to generalize a wider trend or pattern of virtual behavior. Additionally, the literature on gatekeeping as a concept in the Internet and particularly in virtual communities is scarce and no systematic frameworks exist. Subsequently, a bottom-up approach is required in order not to constrain the study with models that are not appropriate for dealing with gatekeeping; a top-down approach is also necessary in order to cast a meaningful preliminary set of potential relevant variables. Therefore, I integrate a bottom-up with a top-down methodology and combine quantitative and qualitative methods that take into account the lack of literature, as noted above. I further detail our methodology below.

3. Research Method

The empirical study of gatekeeping was done by drilling into unidentified virtual communities³ that are moderated by managers, and more specifically virtual forums. It was conducted in Israel and involved the largest five virtual community service providers. The sampled⁴ communities (N=715) comprised 70% of all unidentified communities hosted on platforms of institutional enablers in Israel. The study combined a bottom-up and a top-down methodology. The first phase was to apply the top-down approach and decide upon a large set of potential variables (91 variables) that could be relevant to the process of controlling information in virtual forums. The set of variables was created while taking into account the theoretical typology of gatekeeping mechanisms and gatekeepers that was specially built for this study (Barzilai-Nahon, 2004) together with conducting open interviews and later follow-up interviews with different hierarchies of the virtual communities' environment (CEO, editors of community enablers, managers who are responsible for the forums' managers, and the forum managers themselves). The set of pre-determined variables allowed, on the one hand, applying constructs that were theoretically meaningful from a perspective of gatekeeping (i.e., top-down research). On the other hand, it enabled us not to impose pre-determined relationships between the variables and to use data-mining techniques on the large original data set for exploring those various relationships (i.e., bottom-up process).

Four variables⁵ out of the ninety one (including the dependent variable) had to be constructed after doing a content analysis of the messages. Five research assistants were assigned to the task. To keep the data set manageable, out of the three years of data, only

³ By 'unidentified virtual communities' I refer to communities in which users are not requested to reveal their real identity to be able to subscribe as members of these communities.

⁴ The definition of Rheingold (2000) was taken as an anchor - "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Only forums that satisfied the conditions of being a virtual community were taken into account.

⁵ The four variables that needed a content analysis were; 'the reason for deleting a message by the manager', 'manager type', 'forum type', 'forum subject'. These variables were identified as important to examine as part of the top-down methodology, and could not be provided by the service providers.

one month was sampled with 1.385 million messages that were exchanged in 715 virtual communities.

The third phase applied the bottom-up approach by using Data Mining methodology set by CRISP-DM (Cross-Industry Standard Process for Data Mining) Consortium (Chapman et al., 2000, p. 23). Data mining techniques may be regarded as bottom-up approaches that rely on the process of constructing a model to represent a dataset. The dataset contained a large volume of data – data that came from 715 virtual communities over a period of three years. The final dataset appears in the form of a matrix of 80 variables and 1.385 million records, so that the number of overall observations is very large ($N = 112.185M$).

The analysis of the findings below is focused on understanding the main visible gatekeeping activity that occurs in virtual forums – deleting messages. Accordingly, the findings were analyzed for sorting out to two main issues: did a gatekeeping event occur, and why did a gatekeeping event occur?

4. Behind the illusion of Open Virtual Space: Findings

The study includes a diverse number of forums. It is important to include different types of virtual communities in order to encompass different structures of discourse and be able to better generalize trends and factors. Tables 1 and 2 below exhibit the distribution of types of forums that were studied and their subjects.

Table 1: Distribution of Forum Types

Forum Type	Frequency %
Expert Groups	12.0%
Support Groups	9.7%
Discussion Groups	8.1%
Service Providing Groups	8.3%
Salon and Acquaintance Groups	20.4%
Interest Groups	25.0%
Fan Groups	16.5%
Total (N=715 forums)	100.0%

Each one of the types in Table 1 reflects a different type of discourse. For example, expert groups will be oriented towards more of a question and answer types – where there are many members asking and one or few experts replying and advising. Service providing groups in contrast focus on providing technical solutions through sharing information among the members of the community.

Table 2: Distribution of Forum Subjects

Forum Subject	Frequency %
Current events	2.38%
Culture, education and art	7.83%
The economy	2.10%
Social issues	24.34%
Sports and challenge	5.87%
Music	12.45%
Science and technology	4.34%
Health	10.77%
Gastronomy and nutrition	2.24%
Spiritual	4.62%
Entertainment and leisure	15.52%

Law	0.7%
Travel, nature and environment	2.94%
Other	3.92%
Total (N=715 forums)	100.00%

According to my interviews with forum managers (N=47) there were ten main reasons to delete messages in forums (see Table 3 below). The discussion to follow relies on ten explanatory models that were constructed according to the ten reasons that were relevant for understanding why messages were deleted.

Table 3: Reasons for Gatekeeping

Reasons for Gatekeeping	Frequency %
1. Infringement on Communal Culture	45.45%
2. Not Relevant (off topic)	38.58%
3. Commercial Information	7.32%
4. Guarding the boundaries	4.61%
5. Vulgarity	2.19%
6. Unlawful activities	0.97%
7. Outingd	0.26%
8. Slander	0.21%
9. Racism	0.21%
10. Sedition for violence	0.18%
Total	100.00%

Based on the abovementioned reasons for gatekeeping I was able to offer ten explanatory models (Barzilai-Nahon, 2004)⁶. This article will not exhibit detailed statistical models regarding each one of the reasons found in my study as leading to gatekeeping. Instead of explaining each model separately, this article has identified repetitive tendencies along all of the various models while trying to answer ‘how do

⁶ See the full dissertation and explanatory models at <http://www.ischool.washington.edu/karineb/html/pub/PhDBarzilai.pdf>

virtual communities create a sense of order and control of information’, and ‘how do they establish gatekeeping mechanisms’?

The explanatory models shed light on three levels of analysis in the context of gatekeeping in virtual communities:

First, the gatekeeper. In section 5.1 below, the article refers to four gatekeepers’ actors: formal regulators, service providers, community managers and members of the community.

Second, the community. In section 5.2 below the article analyzes the consequences of gatekeeping in the community level.

Third, the gated. Section 5.3. refers to the gated that undergo gatekeeping.

Accordingly, four main results have emerged from the data analysis as explaining whether and why gatekeeping occurs in virtual communities. Below I summarize each one of these and will refer to them in each of the different levels: the gatekeeper, the community and the gated.

(Result No. 1) Identifying Behavior of Sectors – the explanatory models have pointed to specific types of groups of users that are affecting the process of gatekeeping (i.e., guests, service providers and community managers). First, guests (i.e., users who sign-in as guests and not as members of the community) were identified as a group that is significantly more likely to experience gatekeeping than permanent members of virtual communities. This was also true when the message carried commercial information, content that infringed the communal culture or irrelevant content which reflect the three main reasons for deletion in virtual communities (see Table 3).

Both service providers and community managers were found to be more likely to post commercial information that later is deleted than regular members of the community. However, there was a difference between service providers and community managers when it involved posting information that was regarded by the community and its gatekeepers as ‘Infringement on Communal Culture’. Community managers were seven times less likely than others to post information that offended the community, while

service providers were 35 times more likely than others to experience gatekeeping due to harming the community.

(Result No. 2) Focus on Communities' Subject – The subject around which the community evolves appears as a dominant factor in explaining whether gatekeeping occurs. Communities that deal with the economy as their core subject are by far more likely to experience gatekeeping than other communities. The list of subjects, in the order of increasing likelihood to experience gatekeeping, includes: communities of sexual preferences (e.g., homosexual), music, forums with adult material, communities of young people, fan groups, entertainment communities, social acquaintances, politics that concerns political parties, and communities that provide social support. Subjects related to nature, family, culture, art, education and science are less likely to experience gatekeeping.

However the second research question that deals with the reasons for gatekeeping showed different results for the three main reasons for gatekeeping: 'Commercial Information', 'Infringement on Communal Culture' and 'Irrelevance'. Some of the subjects that appear as more 'quiet' in context of general gatekeeping are more likely to experience gatekeeping due to spam/commercial information – under this category are communities whose core subject is education, science, computers, leisure and entertainment, and sports. Communities that deal with subjects of sexual preferences and adult material are less likely to experience gatekeeping when the information control was due to infringement on communal culture. Communities based on the subject of politics reflected duality: while they undergo more information control due to infringement on communal culture their messages were less likely to be deleted due to spam. Finally, in cases where the reason for deletion was due to irrelevant information, communities that deal with subjects of love and romantic relationships, sports and sexual preference are more likely to experience gatekeeping than others.

(Result No. 3) History of Users – the history of users' interactions with gatekeepers influenced the decision whether to delete a message or not. The results show that the

more deleted messages a user has, the more she is likely to experience gatekeeping. Note that this variable refers to deletions in all virtual communities that one user has been affiliated with, within a specific service provider. Also, the results show that in cases where the reason for deletion was spam, one month of history serves as a good indicator for users that might be more likely to be harmful.

(Result No. 4) Exposing Gender – community managers are more likely to delete messages of users without a known gender identity and users who are conceived as falsifying their gender identity more than other users⁷. Additionally, managers were more likely to delete messages posted by men than by women. Nevertheless, in cases where the reason for deletion occurred due to ‘Infringement on Community Culture’ or due to ‘Irrelevance’ (see Table 1), women were more likely to experience gatekeeping than men while, again, people who avoided revealing their gender identity were the group that experienced the most gatekeeping.

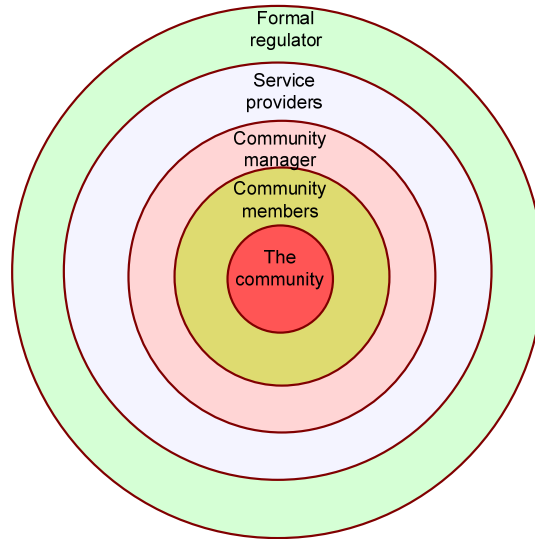
5. Analysis of Gatekeepers, Virtual Communities and Gated

5.1. Gatekeepers: The Duality of Hurting and Guarding the Walls

Although gatekeepers are captured in many instances as obstacles to diversity and freedoms, the classical literature on gatekeeping prefers to focus and conceptualize their motives as protectors of boundaries and autonomy of social networks. However, the roles of these stakeholders and the relations among them are much too complicated to let ourselves be deluded by stereotyping them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ groups of stakeholders. Stakeholders are seemingly interrelated hierarchically (see figure 1). Apparently, as one draws away from the community that is placed in center of the figure, the intensity of the connection with the community becomes weaker, the management of the community becomes less direct, but the authority level of the stakeholders is higher.

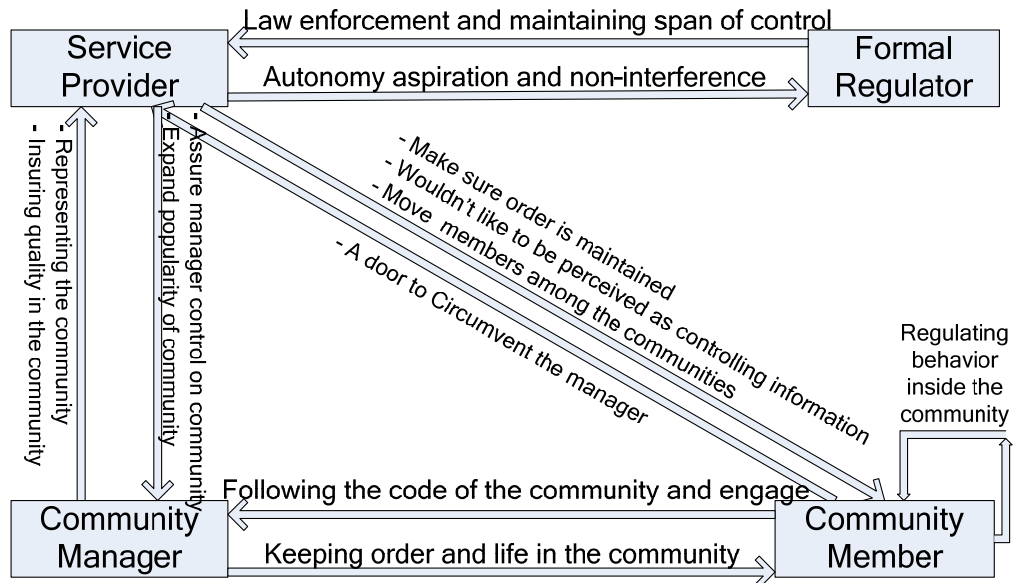
⁷ More details on the coding process of gender can be found at <http://www.ischool.washington.edu/karineb/html/pub/PhDBarzilai.pdf>

Figure 1: Levels of Stakeholders



Looking at the interrelations of virtual community stakeholders from such a prism limits our ability to analyze the tensions between the various stakeholders correctly and understanding their various roles as gatekeepers. Hence, Figure 2 below suggests an alternative illustration of these tensions and mutuality, which will be elaborated next.

Figure 2: Stakeholders' Tensions and Mutuality



The first important aspect that arises from such a structure of relations is the dynamic exchanging roles of the stakeholders as either being a gatekeeper and/or one of the gated. While in traditional communication literature the gatekeeper is being perceived along the entire process as a gatekeeper, in virtual communities' context their role varies according to the gatekeeper's interest and the stakeholders they interact with. Thus, according to the first result [see result 1 - identifying behavior of sectors], managers as well as service providers were the main groups of gated due to posting commercial information (spam) in virtual communities. While taking the role of the guardians toward their communities, in some cases they betray their roles as protecting-gatekeepers. Managers and providers chose to inundate communities with commercial information, which serves as a main source of revenue for providers and a main channel of distributing information for managers, while underestimating the costs of this intrusion into their communities. In those cases, two agendas are involved. While the community is not interested in commercial information, the providers and managers exploit their authority and role as gatekeepers, pursue their interests and distribute this material. Consequently, the community may delete their messages and their role changes from gatekeepers to gated.

Service providers may use their authority in virtual communities even further. Not only can they distribute commercial information, but they may also attempt to attract attention of members and solicit them to move to other spaces on their platform for the sake of another activity (e.g., they attempt to move them to another virtual community). These cases are outright infringements on community culture, since the objective of these activities is to draw members away and reduce their engagement with their own virtual community, thereby weakening its social capital (for example, sending a message by the service provider that invites all members of a forum to join a discussion in another virtual community). The explanatory model has pointed out that service providers exclusively, and not managers, endangered the communities in this way (see Result No. 1). Managers are mostly ready to distribute commercial information upon request from their service providers, but they are unlikely to distribute messages that may destroy their communities, e.g., by moving users to other communities. This example illustrates the continuing changing roles of gatekeeper-gated. Service providers that serve as

gatekeepers may become gated when the community chooses to delete their messages through the communities' managers that act as communal protectors.

The compound relationships among the stakeholders constitute their dual roles as gatekeepers. The Internet has provided members of communities with tools to transform gatekeepers into gated for short periods of time, and even to shift the distribution of power, for a while, towards the community. Eventually, the gatekeeper derives its authority from its assigned stance in the hierarchy since it is always within the service provider's right to decide to terminate groups under its authority. Gatekeepers play a dual role of guarding the communities, and yet exploiting their power and manipulating information to adapt it to their interests and needs.

Levels and types of gatekeeping vary among the stakeholders. Due to deteriorating ability to enforce their power in virtual communities, formal regulators, represented usually by institutions mandated by the government, prefer to exercise their gatekeeping by delegating the control to service providers, who further delegate it down the chain to community managers, who further delegate it to community members who reflect the community norms. In a networked world, the community itself may prove to be one of the most powerful gatekeepers, since it is able to use self-regulation mechanisms of gatekeeping to regulate behavior of members. While community managers will use censorship mechanisms of content, members of the community will mainly use regulation mechanisms (e.g., publishing a code to the community, guiding new members and sanctioning members who breached rules of the community). So we see that the Internet causes gatekeepers to change roles frequently according to the entity they interact with.

Now, let us move from analysis of gatekeepers to the next section dealing with communities as the unit of analysis.

5.2. Communities: Subjects as Drawing Communities

Marginalized groups are non-ruling communities, collectivities which have systematically been excluded from hegemonic power foci (Barzilai, 2003). Increasingly, the literature is emphasizing the vulnerability of virtual communities as non-ruling communities (Bastani, 2000; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Most of those studies are qualitative and examine specific case studies of marginalized groups and aspects of intolerance towards these communities (for example, entering a homosexual virtual forum in order to create chaos among its members, through posting messages of hate and provocation). My study enables performance of a quantitative, comparative, and empirical examination of different virtual communities on the same platform and to qualitatively examine whether marginalized groups, not conceived as part of the mainstream, are more exposed to harmful attacks from users that are outside the community because of their controversial subjects (see Result No. 2).

My findings concerning the first research question – did gatekeeping occur, Result No. 2- shows that the subject matter of the community, which is the essence of its common good, is more important than the question of whether the group is marginalized or not in the general culture. First, and contrary to conventional expectations (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002), the findings exhibit that virtual communities out of the mainstream do not experience more intrusions and attempts to injure communal norms than other types of virtual communities. Thus for example, virtual communities of gay and lesbian people are less likely to experience gatekeeping than those devoted to sports and music. Second, primarily virtual communities dealing with current events, the economy, and social issues are more likely than others to experience gatekeeping. When it comes to infringement on community culture, communities whose main subject is current events and fan groups were more exposed to harmful material, and therefore tended to experience gatekeeping more often than other communities. Since communities dealing with current events are usually discussing sensitive and controversial issues, their culture tends to be tense. Members in these virtual collectivities are interested in the same subject, which constitutes the glue that holds the community together. However,

they often belong to opposite sides of the barricades, so discussions easily flare up. If gatekeeping takes place in such a case, it is usually because of infringement on communal culture. At the same time, communities that are dealing with current events were less likely to experience gatekeeping because of irrelevance.

Communities concerned with the family, art, culture, education and sciences tended to exhibit less internal conflicts and were able to maintain a more peaceful communal virtual life. These virtual communities are usually more specific and professional in nature, less politically contentious, and therefore tend to attract members interested in narrower fields. It opens fewer opportunities to harm the community through severe political contentions.

According to these findings I argue that the position of a group in a certain culture (i.e., mainstream vs. marginal groups) is not significantly linked to whether the virtual community will become a target for impingement on the Internet. It suggests that the Internet gives new opportunities to users, allowing them to choose their affiliations with the virtual communities they desire. Choices and alternatives in the off-line world are more limited, especially for marginalized groups in society that might suffer further marginalization (Compare: Barzilai 2003). The findings demonstrate that regardless of the community position, virtual communities impose gatekeeping either towards external users who are trying to intrude, and towards their members, as well, if the contentions are bitter and pose a danger to the cohesiveness of the virtual community.

To conclude the argument: cyberspace offers users the opportunity to choose their affiliation to communities, and does not impose relationships as occur in most cases in off-line communities. This allows marginalized groups to feel more inclusive and less fearful of bonding together in cyberspace. They are more inclined to create a strong social capital and a communal core that will enable them to resist attacks on their communities. Furthermore, the correlation between the subject matter of the community and the frequency of gatekeeping shows that virtual communities are diverse and offer a

plurality of choices for users who can interact at once with many communities, in a way and to a degree that is impossible in real life.

Yet, virtual communities have their own boundaries both for outsiders and insiders. I argue that there is a paradox of freedom. Freedoms given to users in virtual communities due to the structure of the virtual space and its stakeholders have created other facets of gatekeeping relying mainly on self-regulation mechanisms. Community members who can choose their affiliations according to their free will feel more engaged and are inclined to contribute more to the general good of the virtual community. This voluntary engagement will generate social capital (Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005a). Although social capital may be different in cyberspace than in the real world, our discussion demonstrates that commitments of users in cyberspace may be strong.

Marginalized groups may create a strong sense of social capital, maybe even stronger than in the real world. Aside from the massive literature on the benefits of social capital in communities (Bresnen, Edelman, Newell, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2004), some scholars have raised skeptical views about social capital's meaning (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Prusak & Cohen, 2001). My study finds that marginalized groups as well as mainstream groups with strong social capital and communitarian feelings may create a strong homogeneity of ideas and expressions, while oppressing any alternative perspectives that are not consensual. Hence, online marginalized communities will oppress opinions that are different, while those opinions may well be situated as mainstream in similar offline communities. Marginalized communities have to experience a certain oxymoron. Their created strong communal basis and identity notwithstanding, they are marked with boundaries that exclude users who are outside the community (see also (Prusak & Cohen, 2001)). So the paradox of freedom is that the more freedom given to individuals (both from marginalized groups and mainstream groups), this freedom is being used unconsciously to construct strong mechanisms that may effectively confine these freedoms. Users prefer to be affiliated with communities characterized by subjects that have common ground with their interests. This leads to constructing a strong social capital and syndromes of groupthink (Janis, 1972) which may lead to gatekeeping

mechanisms that will allow only the group voice to be heard. Not being exposed to all available information and to others' ideas confines our freedoms. Apparently, freedom exists while in practice most of the control and rule making is concentrated in the hands of a few service providers as gatekeepers, and therefore this is a bounded freedom to the rules of the service providers. Even in this bounded freedom the community demonstrates self-gatekeeping processes. Now, we are moving to the gated as the third unit of analysis.

5.3. Gated: Illusion of Anonymity

As alternatives and choices, and the ability to create and produce content, are growing, so is the belief of the gated that they have discretion over their anonymity, and are able to choose how to reveal information and maintain anonymity. It is a misconception of the gated in evaluating their power and freedom on the Internet, a misconception that over time and along with a learning process is replaced with new meaning of the interrelations with the other gatekeepers and stakeholders. In the study, result No. 1 revealed that guest users were more likely to experience gatekeeping than permanent members of communities. Service providers enable users to login to communities either with a permanent user account or with a guest account. They believe that a 'guest' login may serve as a stimulus for users, enabling them to enjoy the content of virtual communities without committing themselves to subscribe. Also, service providers provide the guest account feature because they believe that in this way, strangers who are not part of the community might be able to participate in some cases in discussions and at the same time remain distinguished from the regular members of the virtual community – creating boundaries between the community and its outside environment; a win-win situation for both the virtual community and its guests.

Taking into consideration that the studied communities were unidentified (i.e., members were not requested to validate their identity), why would the gated prefer to join as guests rather than as permanent members? From interviews with forum managers and from the content analysis of the messages done for this study, it is clear that in most

virtual communities many members know each other's patterns of behavior. As a community matures, its members become more familiar with each other and kinship relationships are developed, especially among members that construct the virtual community's core (usually the seniors) (Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005a). Most interactions are done using nicknames and not real names, and knowing each other mainly refers to the identity one has constructed for him or herself in the Internet. There is a vast, rich literature on the issue of anonymity in the Internet (Dimitrova, Connolly-Ahern, Williams, Kaid, & Reid, 2003; Donath, 1999; Lessig, 1999; Wallace, 1999).

According to the literature, the added anonymity with respect to the community (and not other external stakeholders) provides the guest a greater opportunity for free expression with minimal consideration of group pressures and without the risk of revenge. It enables the guest to disseminate information, which might have significant implications for the community, without assuming formal responsibility to the community. Using a guest account provides an additional layer of anonymity to members of the community. Surprisingly, the enhanced personal security is not aimed towards the formal regulators (i.e., the authorities) or service providers. Members of the community are aware today that in most cases service providers can track and identify users with a high degree of confidence, for example, by examining their IP address. Using a guest account increases the anonymity vis-à-vis the community and its members and allows the user to join without providing personal details and choose a nickname, thereby minimizing the risk of being exposed by other members.

The content analysis of guest messages reveals that in most instances those guest accounts are not used by outsiders but are rather an avenue for members of the virtual community to separate themselves from the virtual identity they have created. Members are aware of their image and relationships in their communities and do not want to jeopardize their status in their communities due to their attitudes and behavior. Accordingly, logging in to the community with a guest account is often done because they think their views would hurt the hegemonic norms expressed by the community. Therefore, guest identities are more likely to experience gatekeeping and their messages are more likely to be deleted.

At this junction a paradox occurs. While guest accounts are a way for members of a community to generate debates and express diverse opinions among its members without being subjected to the risk of punishment by the community, in actuality, appearing as guests may increase the probability of their messages being deleted by the managers of the community. My findings clearly show that gatekeeping may lead to silencing voices that are not in accordance with the mainstream attitudes in the community, thus creating monolithic virtual spaces without a high level of information diversity. The mechanism of guest accounts provides users with the illusion that both anonymity and freedom to express views will increase. My findings have refuted that illusion.

In analyzing the anonymity of the gated in virtual communities, Result No. 3 uncovers that the gatekeeping history of community members serves as a significant factor that affects future gatekeeping. This result indicates that users have patterns of virtual behavior. Users that had more deleted messages and who were more punished by the community than other members were more likely to experience further gatekeeping. According to the explanatory models created by the data mining, a historical profile of a users with “conviction” (user’s deletion records) over the platform may suggest a good indication as to whether a specific user may potentially embark on activities that hurt communities. Moreover, according to the models, looking at the user history only within a specific community is not enough to predict or understand its virtual behavior pattern. It is vital to check also the horizontal virtual history of a user, in all the communities with which the user has been affiliated on the platform. In cases in which messages were of commercial nature (spam), even a record of one month of deleted messages was sufficient to provide a good indication of the chances of a user being intrusive and therefore experiencing gatekeeping. Users who invade a virtual community with the purpose of distributing advertisements and commercial material are usually striving to simultaneously post the same message in many communities; after being discovered their usernames are usually blocked. Therefore, in most cases of commercial information, there is simply no history from which one may learn about the gated user; if there is one, it is usually short, such as one month.

According to my findings as analyzed above one may wonder whether members of communities are anonymous in practice. While providers indeed might have access to such information (e.g., the number of deletions of a member of a community) on their platforms, the specific communities' managers do not have access to every individual member history record over the whole platform through the information systems accumulated by the service providers. Why then does the deletion record of a user affect chances of future messages to be deleted, if managers do not know this cross-community record beforehand? As virtual communities mature, the manager and the core of the community (i.e., the senior members who control the base of social capital) learn and become familiar with patterns of behavior of their members. This is similar to the way in which people interpret the behavior of others in the real world. With experience and once a pattern of behavior is being identified, the process of assessment becomes more of an automatic procedure (sometimes without a justified cause). The virtual learning process is not necessarily a formal process, but is part of the self-regulation processes that are being carried out in communities. Through those processes, informal images and categorizations are assigned to each of the members according to the accumulated activity within the community. A member who is considered to be a constant agitator will be handled by managers rigidly and will experience strong gatekeeping. Contrary to conventional expectations, my results demonstrate that despite a certain measure of anonymity that exists on the Internet (e.g., the ability of members to change their identity and online behavior more easily than in the off-line world) members of virtual communities adopt consistent patterns of virtual behavior. Once a label of an irritant has been assigned to a user and followed by a process of learning, it would be very difficult to change the view of the gatekeepers. Accordingly, the rigid treatment those users receive is likely to arise and their messages will probably continue to be deleted through gatekeeping. The results indicate that regardless of anonymity, virtual identities tend to exhibit a consistent behavior in cyberspace.

Finally, Result No. 4 describes some anonymity issues in virtual communities from a gendered perspective. As already been noted, in all cases, users who did not provide

information about their gender were regarded by forum managers as the most dangerous group, and were more likely to experience gatekeeping than either men or women who identified their gender. For users identifying their gender, the general gatekeeping model (the model that explicates ‘did a gatekeeping event occur?’) indicated that relative to their proportion among the users on the provider’s platform, men were more likely to experience gatekeeping except in cases of infringement on community culture and irrelevant messages (54.2%), while women’s messages were more likely to be deleted relative to the women’s share among the users on the provider’s platform (45.8%).

According to interviews that I conducted with forum managers, while women are more inclined than men to raise issues that concern social relationships among members of a community, women are also inclined to divert discussions from the main subject of the community to other topics, which are perceived as turning out to be irrelevant by the communities’ managers. In turn those activities may later be subjected to gatekeeping activities (e.g., deleting these items). For the same reason, in cases that are perceived by the managers as infringement on community culture, women were more likely to experience gatekeeping than men.

It seems that on the one hand, the virtual space is subjected to patriarchal perceptions, as if women who provoke unconventional thinking endanger the community. On the other hand, women find in cyberspace a platform for expressing social voices that are more easily suppressed among off-line communities. Therefore, women were also more likely to provoke the community and exercise a divisive influence. The virtual space, as this study exhibits, is both a source of redemption for women who might be more suppressed in the off-line space, and on the other hand, cyberspace has its own gatekeeping mechanisms, also against women. In the general model, however, gatekeeping is more likely to be activated on men than on women. Managers explain that this is because of a perception that men are liable to create more “troubles” than women, and are therefore examined more thoroughly by managers. Based on the findings, any conclusion about cyberspace being gender-free and, alternatively, any statement as if it has basic gender characteristics would be too simplistic. This issue shows that analysis

through a network gatekeeping framework may reveal new phenomena concerning compound aspects of gender on the Internet. Moreover, my findings divulge that being anonymous does not always assist the gated to gain power in their community. Rather, in many cases virtual anonymity is a disadvantage.

6. Implications and Conclusion

The findings that are analyzed above through a network gatekeeping framework have elicited some points for further professional discussion. First, scholars should look more carefully into the exchanging roles of gatekeeper-gated in the Internet. Further, we need to continue to investigate the duality of the different gatekeepers as guardians of the virtual space and also as censors who impose limitations on communal virtual discourse. For example, service providers are not concerned with the welfare of their users and often they overflow them with commercial material, including offers contrary to the interest of the virtual communities. In most cases, forum managers allow the posting of commercial information approved by the providers but delete information that they interpret as harmful to their community. On the other hand, providers confront sensitive interactions with regulators concerning the authority over their platforms. The above analysis exemplifies the role of self-regulation mechanisms in virtual communities' context. In many cases self-regulation mechanisms may have advantages over state regulation by providing a more efficient way to enforce norms and direct behavior in virtual communities and enable communities to operate effectively. Nevertheless, these mechanisms may also serve as censorship tools that empower hegemonic speech, and silence counter-hegemonic forces and hinder institutionalized accountability.

Finally, while previous studies have explored specific virtual communities using a methodology of case-study and suggested that marginalized groups are also more vulnerable in cyberspace, my study has utilized a much larger data set and has arrived at different conclusions. Through using a new concept of gatekeeping and both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this study finds that in contrast to off-line communities, marginal groups in virtual space are not more subjugated to intolerant behavior of

outsiders. It invites future studies to examine more carefully this unexpected difference between on- line and off- line communities using, *inter alia*, criteria alike the topics of communal virtual debates.

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