

PEOPLE, SOCIETY,  
AND  
MASS  
COMMUNICATIONS

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## The "Gatekeeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News \*

IN 1949 IT SEEMED fairly obvious to the writer that even as the body of theoretical concepts on the nature of mass communications was evolving, an important notion was being overlooked. Through the development of a germinal suggestion from an important study by the late Kurt Lewin, it became apparent that (1) the flow of any news items would be through certain channels and, more important, (2) that certain places within these channels would serve as "gates" through which given news items might or might not be admitted.

Thus, with the cooperation of a patient editor, who was curious enough to see what kind of "gatekeeper" he might be, we studied closely the manner in which he functioned at his "gate." Analysis of the reasons given by our "Mr. Gates" for rejecting various types of news stories indicated how highly subjective and reliant upon value-judgments based on the gatekeeper's own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the selection of "news" actually is.

Dr. Walter Gieber, through numerous articles and monographs, has added substantially to the whole area opened by the original "gatekeeper" essay. In an original paper written for this volume, "News Is What Newspapermen Make It," Gieber summarizes the major findings of these studies. It is noteworthy that in 1956 when Gieber studied the telegraph editors of 16 Wisconsin dailies he was discomfited to learn that (1) the editors were "passive," i.e., they played no real or active role as communicators and made no truly critical examination of the incoming wire news, and (2) that as communicators these 16 editors had no "real perception of their audience." When Gieber replicated his Wisconsin study with a similar group of small-city dailies in Indiana, he found the same

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phenomenon and, as he puts it, he was, if anything, more discomfited. For if, as Wright has suggested in his essay (pp. 93-108), a major function of the newspaper is the purposeful surveillance of the environment for the reader, then it would appear that this function was only being met fortuitously.

Subsequently, Gieber made an extremely valuable analysis of how a set of gatekeepers handle local civil liberty news. Here again he found that although the reporters were able to rationalize their concepts of audience needs, they were less successful in "knowing" their audience. The argument that Gieber makes is that far too often the press (via its "gatekeepers") has lost sight of its proper goal: to "serve" the audience. The means, e.g., the news-gathering machinery and bureaucracy, too often, Gieber states, determine the ends. Thus, Gieber has elaborated on the initial gatekeeper concept to explore the social forces which bear on the making of news; for, short of understanding them, he believes, we cannot understand what news really is.

Other writers, such as Warren Breed, Roy E. Carter, Jr., Douglass Cater, Robert Judd and Ken Macrorie, have touched on aspects of the "gatekeeper" process without necessarily using the phrase. Certainly, Leo C. Rosten's valuable study of the Washington correspondents in the mid-1930's should be read by any student concerned with the gatekeeping function. How valuable it would be were Dr. Rosten, or someone he might designate, to replicate this early study with newsmen working in our capital today. (See p. 174, n. 3.)

Wilbur Schramm, commenting recently on studies of this sort,\* said, "Participant observer studies are clearly called for." Certainly, we agree with Schramm that the kind of inquiry reported in this volume by White and Gieber might well be replicated many times over, with other "gatekeepers," before the gatekeeping process is understood. Certainly, a number of hypotheses remain to be explored. For example, as an editor grows older and remains at his desk from one decade to the next, does he become more rigid in his view of what is "good" copy and what is not? Further, the relationship between the theory of cognitive dissonance and a gatekeeper's choice of one press association's story over another's might prove valuable to analyze. A study, for example, of a Soviet national (or an American, for that matter) who works for the Information section of the United Nations might prove quite revealing in terms of the gatekeeping function. It is to be hoped that the inclusion of the following two essays in this volume may stimulate further explorations into this area of mass-communications study.

D. M. W.

\* Wilbur Schramm, "Challenge to Communications Research," in R. O. Nafziger and D. M. White (eds.), *Introduction to Mass Communications Research* (Louisiana State U. P., 1963).

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It was the late Kurt Lewin, truly one of the great social scientists of our time, who applied the term "gatekeeper" to a phenomenon which is of considerable importance to students of mass communications. In his last article,<sup>1</sup> before his untimely death, Dr. Lewin pointed out that the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels was dependent on the fact that certain areas within the channels functioned as "gates." Carrying the analogy further, Lewin said that gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by "gatekeepers," and in the latter case an individual or group is "in power" for making the decision between "in" or "out."

To understand the functioning of the "gate," Lewin said, was equivalent to understanding the factors which determine the decisions of the "gatekeepers," and he rightly suggested that the first diagnostic task is the finding of the actual "gatekeepers."

The purpose of this study is to examine closely the way one of the "gatekeepers" in the complex channels of communication operates his "gate."

Wilbur Schramm made an observation central to this whole study when he wrote that "no aspect of communication is so impressive as the enormous number of choices and discards which have to be made between the formation of the symbol in the mind of the communicator, and the appearance of a related symbol in the mind of the receiver."<sup>2</sup> To illustrate this in terms of a news story let us consider, for example, a Senate hearing on a proposed bill for federal aid to education. At the hearing

1. Kurt Lewin, *Channels of Group Life*, Human Relations, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 145.

2. Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Communications* (U. of Illinois Press, 1949), p. 289.

there will be reporters from the various press associations, Washington correspondents of large newspapers which maintain staffs in the capital, as well as reporters for local newspapers. All of these form the first "gate" in the process of communication. They have to make the initial judgment as to whether a story is "important" or not. One has only to read the Washington stories from two newspapers whose general editorial attitudes differ widely on such an issue as federal aid to education to realize from the beginning of the process the "gatekeepers" are playing an important role. The appearance of the story in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* might well show some differences in treatment. It is apparent that even the actual physical event of the Senate hearing (which we might call the *criterion event*) is reported by two reporters in two different perceptual frameworks and that the two men bring to the "story" different sets of experience, attitudes, and expectations.

Thus a story is transmitted from one "gatekeeper" after another in the chain of communications. From reporter to rewrite man, through bureau chief to "state" file editors at various press association offices, the process of choosing and discarding is continuously taking place. And finally we come to our last "gatekeeper," the one to whom we turn for the purpose of our case study. This is the man who is usually known as the wire editor on the nonmetropolitan newspaper. He has charge of the selection of national and international news which will appear on the front and "jump" pages of his newspaper, and usually he makes up these pages.

Our "gatekeeper" is a man in his middle 40s, who after approximately 25 years' experience as a journalist (both as reporter and copy editor) is now the wire editor of a morning newspaper of approximately 30,000 circulation in a highly industrialized Midwest city of 100,000. It is his job to select from the avalanche of wire copy daily provided by the Associated Press, United Press and International News Service what 30,000 families will read on the front page of their morning newspapers. He also copy edits and writes the headlines for these stories. His job is similar to that which newspapermen throughout the country hold in hundreds of nonmetropolitan newspapers.<sup>3</sup> And in many respects he is the most important "gatekeeper" of all, for if he rejects a story the work of all those who preceded him in reporting and transmitting the story is negated. It is understood, of course, that the story could have "ended" (insofar as its subsequent transmission is concerned) at any of the

3. By far the majority of the approximately 1,780 daily newspapers in this country are in the smaller cities not on the main trunk wires of the press associations. Their reliance on the single wire "state" operations which emanate from the larger cities thus places great responsibility in the hands of the wire editor.

previous "gates." But assuming the story has progressed through all the "gates," it is obvious that this wire editor is faced with an extremely complicated set of decisions to make regarding the limited number of stories he can use.

Our purpose in this study was to determine some preliminary ideas as to why this particular wire editor selected or rejected the news stories filed by the three press associations (and transmitted by the "gatekeeper" above him in Chicago) and thereby gain some diagnostic notions about the general role of the "gatekeeper" in the areas of mass communications.

To this end we received the full cooperation of "Mr. Gates," the above-mentioned wire editor. The problem of finding out what Mr. Gates selected from the mass of incoming wire copy was not difficult, for it appeared on the front and "jump" pages of his newspaper each morning. Actually, we were far more concerned with the copy that did not get into the paper. So for the week of February 6 through 13, 1949, Mr. Gates saved every piece of wire copy that came to his desk. Instead of throwing the dispatch into the waste basket once he had decided not to use it, he put it into a large box next to his desk. Then at one o'clock when his pages were made up and his night's work through, Mr. Gates went through every piece of copy in the "reject" box and wrote on it the reason why he had initially rejected it, assuming that he could recall the reason. In the cases where no ascertainable reason had occurred to him he made no notations on the copy. Although this meant that Mr. Gates had to spend between an hour-and-a-half and two hours each night at this rather tedious phase of the project, he was perfectly willing to do this throughout the entire week.

When Mr. Gates had turned over the raw material of his choices for the week period, we tried to analyze his performance in terms of certain basic questions which presented themselves. These questions are applicable not only to this particular "gatekeeper," but with modifications to all of the "gatekeepers" in the communications process. Thus, after determining what wire news came in during the week in terms of total column inches and categories, we measured the amount of wire news that appeared in the papers for that period.

Assuming that five lines of wire copy are equivalent to a column inch in a newspaper, Mr. Gates received approximately 12,400 inches of press association news from the AP, UP and INS during the week. Of this he used 1297 column inches of wire news, or about *one-tenth*, in the seven issues we measured. Table 1 shows a breakdown by categories of the wire news received and used during the week.

It is only when we study the reasons given by Mr. Gates for rejecting almost nine-tenths of the wire copy (in his search for the one-tenth for

**Table 1—Amounts of Press Association News Mr. Gates Received and Used During Seven-Day Period**

CATEGORY	WIRE COPY RECEIVED		WIRE COPY USED	
	Col. In.*	% of Total	Col. In.*	% of Total
Crime	527	4.4	41	3.2
Disaster	405	3.4	44	3.4
Political				
State	565	4.7	88	6.8
National	1722	14.5	205	15.8
Human interest	4171	35.0	301	23.2
International				
Political	1804	15.1	176	13.6
Economic	405	3.4	59	4.5
War	480	4.0	72	5.6
Labor	650	5.5	71	5.5
National				
Farm	301	2.5	78	6.0
Economic	294	2.5	43	3.3
Education	381	3.2	56	4.3
Science	205	1.7	63	4.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,910</b>	<b>99.9</b>	<b>1297</b>	<b>100.1</b>

\* Counting five lines of wire copy as one column inch.

which he has space) that we begin to understand how highly subjective, how reliant upon value-judgments based on the "gatekeeper's" own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of "news" really is. In this particular case the 56 wordings given may be divided into two main categories: (1) rejecting the incident as unworthy of being reported, and (2) selecting from many reports of the same event. (See Table 2.)

Thus we find him rejecting one piece of wire copy with the notation, "He's too Red." Another story is categorically marked "Never use this." dealt with the Townsend Plan, and because this "gatekeeper" feels that the merits of the Townsend Plan are highly dubious, the chances of wire news about the Plan appearing in the paper are negligible. Eighteen pieces of copy were marked "B. S.," 16 were marked "Propaganda." One interesting notation on a story said "Don't care for suicides." Thus we see that many of the reasons which Mr. Gates gives for the rejection of the stories fall into the category of highly subjective value-judgments.

The second category gives us an important clue as to the difficulty of making choices of one piece of copy over another. No less than 168 times, Mr. Gates makes the notation "No space." In short, the story (in his eyes) has merit and interest, he has no "personal" objections to it, but space is at a premium. It is significant to observe that the later in the



**Table 2—Reasons for Rejection of Press Association News Given by Mr. Gates During Seven-Day Period**

Reason	Number of Times Given
Rejecting incident as worthy of reporting	423
Not interesting (61); no interest here (43)	104
Dull writing (51); too vague (26); drags too much (3)	80
No good (31); slop (18); B. S. (18)	67
Too much already on subject (54); used up (4); passed—dragging out; * too much of this; goes on all the time; dying out	62
Trivial (29); would ignore (21); no need for this; wasted space; not too important; not too hot; not too worthy	55
Never use this (16); never use (7)	23
Propaganda (16); he's too Red; sour grapes	18
Wouldn't use (11); don't care for suicide stories; too suggestive; out of good taste	14
Selecting from reports of the same event	919
Would use if space (221); no space (168); good—if space (154); late—used up (61); too late—no space (34); no space—used other press service; would use partially if space	640
Passed for later story (61); waiting for later information (48); waiting on this (33); waiting for this to hatch (17); would let drop a day or two (11); outcome will be used—not this; waiting for later day progress	172
Too far away (24); out of area (16)	40
Too regional (36)	36
Used another press service: Better story (11); shorter (6); this is late; lead more interesting; meatier	20
Bannered yesterday	1
I missed this one	1

\* In this and other cases where no number follows the reason, that reason was given only once.

evening the stories came in, the higher was the proportion of the "no space" or "would use" type of notation. As the evening progresses the wire editor's pages become more and more filled up. A story that has a good chance of getting on the front page at 7:30 or 8 o'clock in the evening may not be worth the precious remaining space at 11 o'clock. The notation "Would use" is made 221 times, and a similar one "Good—if space" is made 154 times. Other reasons which fall into the mechanical category are "Used INS—shorter" or "Used UP—this is late." Even in this category, though, we find subjective value-judgments such as "Used AP—better story" or "Used INS—lead more interesting."

Now that we have some preliminary knowledge of the manner in which Mr. Gates selects or rejects news for his front and "jump" pages, it might be interesting to examine his performance for a specific day. In Table 3 the amount and type of news which appeared on the front and

**Table 3—Column Inches Devoted to Content Categories in February 9, 1949, Issue \***

Category	Front Page and Jump	
Local		3.50
Crime		5.00
Disaster		9.75
Political		41.25
Local	9.75	
State	19.50	
National	12.00	
Human interest		43.75 †
International		23.00
Political	11.50	
Economic	11.50	
War	.—	
National		24.25
Labor	19.25	
Farm	.—	
Economic	5.00	
Education		.—
Science		6.00 ‡

\* Banner not included.

† About one-half of this amount were Cardinal Mindzenty stories, which, because of the human appeal, were classed as Human Interest.

‡ Three column picture not included.

"jump" pages edited by Gates for February 9, 1949 is presented. Table 4 shows the total number of dispatches (classified as to type of story) received but not used.

During this particular week the Cardinal Mindzenty trial was receiving wide play from newspapers throughout the land and the press associations were filing many stories covering all phases of the case. So in making a comparison of the dispatches received and the stories which appeared it should not be surprising to note that Human Interest news was used most. Yet even in his treatment of the Mindzenty case, Mr. Gates used highly subjective reasons in his selection of stories. Particularly interesting in this connection is his remark on an Associated Press story which he rejected with the comment "*Would pass, propaganda itself.*" The story dealt with a statement by Samuel Cardinal Stritch, who said, "It is very unfortunate that our news agencies are not giving their sources of information in their day-by-day reports on the trial of Cardinal Mindzenty. It should be made clear that restrictions have been made on a few American correspondents who have been present at the trial." It is obvious that Mr. Gates resented the implication by Cardinal Stritch that the press associations were not doing all they could to tell the Mindzenty story. The com-

**Table 4—Number of Pieces of Press Association Releases Received But Not Used February 9, 1949**

Category	Received before Front Page Was Made Up	Received after Front Page Was Made Up	Total Received For Day
Local	3		3
Crime	32	1	33
Disaster	15		15
Political			22
Local	1	2	
State	10	2	
National	6	1	
Human interest	65	14	79
International			46
Political	19	5	
Economic	9	1	
War	10	2	
National			37
Farm	2		
Labor	13	1	
Economic	17	4	
Education	3	2	5
Science	5	2	7
Total for day	210	37	247

ment which Mr. Gates put on a United Press story dealing with Cardinal Stritch's statement, "No space—pure propaganda," illustrates his sensitivity on this particular point. And when the story came to his attention for the third time that evening as an International News Service dispatch he again rejected it, this time with the statement "Would pass." Perhaps his feeling of anger against the story had cooled by this time, but Mr. Gates still considered the story worthless.

Political news enjoyed the second largest play. Here we begin to have an indication of preference, as political news ranked only fifth in the "dispatches received" department. Political news seems to be a favorite with Mr. Gates, for even if we subtract the almost ten inches given to a local political story it ranks second in play.

While a total of 33 crime stories was received, only five column inches of crime appeared on the front and "jump" pages of Mr. Gates' paper. The obvious conclusion is that crime news, as such, does not appeal to this wire editor. But it should be noted that no "big" crime stories broke that day.

As one examines the whole week's performance of Mr. Gates, as manifested in the stories he chose, certain broad patterns become apparent. What do we know, for example, about the kinds of stories that

he selected in preference to others from the same category? What tests of subject matter and way-of-writing did Mr. Gates seem to apply? In almost every case where he had some choice between competing press association stories Mr. Gates preferred the "conservative." I use this expression not only in terms of its political connotations, but also in terms of the style of writing. Sensationalism and insinuation seemed to be avoided consistently.

As to the way-of-writing that he preferred, Mr. Gates showed an obvious dislike for stories that had too many figures and statistics. In almost every case where one news agency supplied a story filled with figures and statistics and the competing agency's story was an easier going, more interpretative than statistical type of story, the latter appeared in the paper. An indication of his standards for writing is seen in Table 1, where 26 stories were rejected as being "too vague," 51 rejected for "dull writing" and 61 for being "not interesting."

Another question that should be considered in this study (and subsequent ones) is: Does the category really enter into the choice? That is, does the wire editor try to chose a certain amount of crime news, human interest news, etc.? Are there some other divisions of subject matter or form which he chooses in this manner, such as a certain number of one-paragraph stories?

Insofar as this "gatekeeper" is representative of wire editors as a whole, it does not appear that there is any conscious choice of news by categories. During this particular week under examination an emphasis on the Human Interest type of story was seen mainly because of the large news appeal of the Cardinal Mindzenty story. It would be most interesting and valuable to ascertain how a wire editor determines what one issue or type of story is "the" story of the week. Many times that decision is made by "gatekeepers" above him, or by "gatekeepers" in competing media. Can a wire editor refuse to play a story "up" when his counterpart in the local radio station is playing it to the hilt? Likewise, can a wire editor play down a story when he sees competing papers from nearby metropolitan areas coming into his city and playing up the story? These factors undoubtedly have something to do in determining the wire editor's opinion as to what he should give the reading public the next morning. This brings up the rather obvious conclusion that theoretically all of the wire editor's standards of taste should refer back to an audience who must be served and pleased.

Subsequent to Mr. Gates' participation in the project to determine the "reasons" for selecting or rejecting wire stories during a week, he was asked to consider at length four questions which we submitted. His answers to these questions tell us much about Mr. Gates, particularly if

they are collated with the "spot" reasons which came under the pressure of a working night.

*Question 1: "Does the category of news affect your choice of news stories?"*

The category of news definitely enters into my choice of stories. A crime story will carry a warning as will an accident story. Human interest stories provoke sympathy and could set examples of conduct. Economic news is informative for some readers and over the heads of others. I make no attempt to hold a rigid balance in these selections but do strive for variety. The category of news suggests groups that should be interested in a particular story, that is, teachers, laborers, professional people, etc. Wire service reports can't keep a strictly balanced diet and for this reason we could not attempt it. For the most part, the same thinking applies in the selection of shorts, although some are admittedly filler material.

*Question 2: "Do you feel that you have any prejudices which may affect your choice of news stories?"*

I have few prejudices, built-in or otherwise, and there is little I can do about them. I dislike Truman's economics, daylight saving time and warm beer, but I go ahead using stories on them and other matters if I feel there is nothing more important to give space to. I am also prejudiced against a publicity-seeking minority with headquarters in Rome, and I don't help them a lot. As far as preferences are concerned, I go for human interest stories in a big way. My other preferences are for stories well-wrapped up and tailored to suit our needs (or ones slanted to conform to our editorial policies).

*Question 3: "What is your concept of the audience for whom you select stories and what sort of person do you conceive the average person to be?"*

Our readers are looked upon as people with average intelligence and with a variety of interests and abilities. I am aware of the fact we have readers with above average intelligence (there are four colleges in our area) and that there are many with far less education. Anyway, I see them as human and with some common interests. I believe they are all entitled to news that pleases them (stories involving their thinking and activity) and news that informs them of what is going on in the world.

*Question 4: "Do you have specific tests of subject matter or way of writing that help you determine the selection of any particular news story?"*

The only tests of subject matter or way of writing I am aware of when making a selection involve clarity, conciseness and angle. I mentioned earlier that certain stories are selected for their warning, moral or lesson, but I am not inclined to list these reasons as any test of subject matter or way of writing. The clarity trio is almost a constant yardstick in judging a story, especially when I often have three of a kind, AP, UP and INS. Length of a story is another factor (or test) in a selection. The long winded one is usually discarded unless it can be cut to fill satisfactorily.

It is a well-known fact in individual psychology that people tend to perceive as true only those happenings which fit into their own beliefs concerning what is likely to happen. It begins to appear (if Mr. Gates is a fair representative of his class) that in his position as "gatekeeper" the newspaper editor sees to it (even though he may never be consciously aware of it) that the community shall hear as a fact only those events which the newsman, as the representative of his culture, believes to be true.

This is the case study of one "gatekeeper," but one, who like several hundred of his fellow "gatekeepers," plays a most important role as the terminal "gate" in the complex process of communication. Through studying his overt reasons for rejecting news stories from the press associations we see how highly subjective, how based on the "gatekeeper's" own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of "news" really is.

## QUESTIONS

1. If you were repeating this research, what questions would you ask the "gatekeeper" that White did not ask?
2. By comparing different versions of the same story which appear in two or more daily newspapers, can you discern any changes in the respective versions which indicate the "gatekeeping" function? If so, try to hypothesize what were the reasons why the "gatekeeper" played the story as he did. Compare an Associated Press and a United Press International version of the same story.
3. If the transmission of a message about a "criterion event" is altered at several steps (from the "encoding" of the first "gatekeeper" to the "decoding" of the receiver) is it possible to get a "true" picture of a "happening," unless you witness it yourself?

4. The reader of a news story, TV viewer, etc., also may be said to be exercising a "gatekeeping" function in that he refuses to accept certain cues, responds quickly to others, etc. This, of course, is clearly related to what psychologists term "selective perception." If you doubt this, write on a sheet or two of paper as many of your *attitudes* and *opinions* as you can think of at one sitting, e.g., I don't like people who drive big, ostentatious automobiles. Then look again at the last newspaper you thought you had read quite thoroughly. Observe to what extent you have read those things that were customarily meaningful to you, or which did not conflict with your prejudices or predispositions.
  
5. A fruitful area for your own "gatekeeper" study would be to study the managing editor and/or city editor of your campus daily or weekly. By checking an "interview" story, for example, as it appears in your college newspaper with (1) the interviewer, (2) the reporter, and (3) the managing editor of the newspaper, you can determine to what extent the "gatekeeper" principle may apply to even this limited transmission of a message.